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GAO Finds 164,000 In Government Signed Censorship Agreements

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More than 164,000 federal employees have signed agreements barring them for life from writing or speaking on intelligence-related issues without receiving clearance from the government, according to a survey by the General Accounting Office.

More than 111,000 work at the Defense Department and 45,000 others are former DOD employees. State had 4,350; Treasury, 1,733; NASA, 280; Interior, 229; the Federal Emergency Management Agency, 199; and more than 900 elsewhere.

But the GAO said the total figure is undoubtedly higher because several agencies that have large numbers of employees with security clearances, including the Justice and Energy departments, provided questionable figures or none at all. The GAO was not asked to determine if any employees had refused to sign.

In July, 1981, President Reagan ordered officials who have access to secret intelligence to sign a one-page form agreeing not to disclose secret information without receiving their agency's approval. Those who refused to sign would be denied access.

This year the administration sought to strengthen the agreement with a more detailed form. But public and congressional pressure forced National Security Affairs Adviser Robert C. McFarlane to scrap the tougher statement in February.

Although some members of Congress thought that the issue had been put to rest, Rep. Jack Brooks

(D-Tex.) learned that the administration intended to continue asking employees to sign the original agreements. Brooks, chairman of the House Government Operations Committee, and Rep. William D. Ford (D-Mich.), chairman of the House Post Office and the Civil Service Committee, asked the GAO to find out how many employees had signed the agreement.

In the meantime, Brooks introduced a bill that would bar the government from forcing employees other than those who work for the CIA and National Security Agency to sign the agreement. It will be the subject of hearings today before the Post Office subcommittee on civil service.

"I am shocked and dismayed at the findings," Brooks said in a statement. "The report and data collected by the GAO dramatically demonstrate the need for action on my bill ... to ensure that this administration's censorship ... policies are repealed once and for all."

Andrew A. Feinstein, staff director of the House Post Office subcommittee on civil service, said the legislation could mean that "the people working on the Stealth bomber program in Nevada will be exempt from having to sign."

"Now it's clear that the military doesn't like that group of people to be able to write or talk about their work," Feinstein said. "Because it doesn't involve intelligence-gathering operations, it would not be covered under the legislation ... but [the bill] does involve deep, dark secrets.

"Agencies can ask that employees pre-clear speeches and writings, but they could not require the pre-clearance," Feinstein said. He added that the administration had briefed some members of Congress on instances in which the process "would have avoided some damage."

Rep. Patricia Schroeder (D-Colo.), who will chair the hearing today, said she hoped to bring the bill to the House floor this month because "the Reagan administration's interest in prepublication censorship is like a jobs program—it's useless often. We desperately need to stop this situation."